

Interview with Ut Ha
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Interviewer: Kimberlie Kranich

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Ha: My name is Ut Thi Ha, and it's spelled U-T, T-H-I, and H-A. I was born in Da Lat, Vietnam. Da Lat is spelled D-A-L-A-T.

Kranich: Tell me about your family of origin. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Ha: I have a big family, eight total. I am the fifth child in the family. I have two brothers and six sisters.

Kranich: Tell me about your parents. Tell me about who they were and what they did.

Ha: My parents, they were born in North Vietnam. Then, close to 1954, 1952 my family decided to go to the South. Then in 1954, my country was divided into two parts, North and South. The North belonged to communists, and the South belonged to republicans.

Kranich: It's interesting. They moved from the North to the South. Did they have a sense that something was happening? That they'd be safer in the South or was it just something they did?

Ha: I was too little so I didn't know for sure, but I think that they did know about that. So, they decided to go to the South. One more thing because my dad has an Aunt. She moved to the South around 1948.

Kranich: What did your father do? What was his employment?

Ha: My father, when he just came to the South, he was a driver. Actually my family had a truck to carry all the produce for my city to Saigon, the capital city. So my father was the driver for that truck. Later on because of the need of the war, he had to sign up for some Army duty. Then he ended up as a policeman. He never wore the uniform because he was just a security for the center where they called the nuclear research center in my city.

Kranich: And that was with the South Vietnamese Army?

Ha: Right.

Kranich: And your mom, what did your mom do?

Ha: My mom just did some business like selling stuff and you know to support the family. I remember when I was old enough, I remember that I helped my mom a lot.

Kranich: What did you help her do?

Ha: The first thing I remember that when I was in about fifth grade I used to go with my mom in the morning to the farms about three miles away from the center of the city. Because my mom bought all the strawberries from the farm, and we carried them back to the market to sell to the retailers.

Kranich: Did your brothers help with that?

Ha: No, my brother, he's a spoiled child you know. My mom didn't ask him to do anything. He just had to go to school and play around with his friends.

Kranich: And all your sisters and brothers went to school?

Ha: Yeah, we did.

Kranich: How would you describe your family? Was it close? Was it loving? Was it not close? How would you describe that?

Ha: My family is a very close family, a loving family. Because with the tradition of the Vietnamese, we just like big families. Just like some families they have grandparents and then parents and then children and then grandchildren in the same house. It's really close.

Kranich: What do you remember about your city of Da Lat? What was it like? What did it look like? What did it smell like? Do you remember anything like that?

Ha: Yeah, I do. Da Lat is usually in my head because it is a very beautiful city. It's a highland city with old pine trees, flowers year round, and all kind of vegetables that we have here. Da Lat is the place where we produce all kinds of European vegetables. We produce them to all the other cities just like Saigon, Hue, Da Nang, something like that you know.

Kranich: Did your family belong, observe or practice religion in any way?

Ha: My family is Buddhist family, but I remember we would go to the Pagoda just once a year in the New Year.

Kranich: Ok, so it wasn't real prominent. So, Buddhism ok.

Ha: Yeah, but then I converted to Catholic when I got married to my husband.

Kranich: Ok, we'll come back to that. In addition to helping your mother with the produce, what are some other early memories of growing up in Da Lat? Anything else you'd like to share?

Ha: I remember all the beautiful landscapes of Da Lat: lakes, hills and the prairie. I loved that because whenever we had time we just went there for a picnic or with friends or with my family. It's really nice.

Kranich: What year were you born?

Ha: I was born in 1954.

Kranich: I understand from my research that the Vietnam War started in 1959.

Ha: No, it was 1954. Before that, but officially in 1954 my country was divided into two parts.

Kranich: And this was divided by the...?

Ha: I think it was a treaty.

Kranich: After that division and your family had moved from the North to the South, what did your parents say about the division and their moving before you were born? How did they talk about the way your country was split up? Did they share? Did you get a sense of what had happened when you were a child? What did they say about it?

Ha: I think not much because my parents were so busy with eight children. Sometimes my mom told me something about the place where she lived in North Vietnam. I think that my mom missed her city in the North very much. At that time, we had no way to come back because we cannot go back there with communists.

Kranich: Something happened in 1963 when you were nine years old. Tell me what happened.

Ha: A big event happened to my country. My first president of the South his name is Ngô Đình Diệm, and it's spelled N-G-O is his last name, D-I-N-H, is his

middle name, and first name D-I-E-M. His government was turned out by all the high-ranked army people. Then he and his younger brother were killed.

Kranich: Do you remember why they were killed? Do you remember what kind of a president he was? Were there freedoms? Was he a good president? How did you guys think of him?

Ha: To me he is the best president that I have known for my country. He treated his people very nice. He cared for his people. He cared for their freedom. He cared for their rights. I still miss him now.

Kranich: I know that he did some cracking down on protests. There were some Buddhist monks who had protest, and he had some sort of... Did you hear about that?

Ha: Yeah, I did because at that time they used religion. The communists they used religion to their advantage to help them get what they want. President Ngô Đình Diệm, he knew that, so that's why at that time all the Buddhists they brought their altar out to the street. He put it in the middle of the street. It was very bad. The transportation was stuck. People didn't want to do anything, just a big strike for the Buddhists. Finally, the government decided to let the soldiers to come out and clear out all the stuff. Then the Buddhists, they took that as proof that the government was against them. That the government didn't allow them to have freedom in religion. I think that's the kind of thing that's from the communists.

Kranich: Can you tell me a little bit about... What did you see? What did you remember about that time in 1963 when you were nine and before and after the president was killed?

Ha: I was scared. The first time I heard the gunshot. The first time I saw too many soldiers in the city. Then you know I remember you know one day I was in my class, and then the teacher told us you have to go home now because they are fighting in the street. I was small, just nine. We just tried to find some way to go home because we cannot take the main street. It was so scary.

Kranich: So your parents didn't come get you? How did you get home?

Ha: No, because my dad had to come back from his work, and my mom had to come back from the market too. Everyone had to find a way to go home.

Kranich: So you got home, then what happened after that the next day?

Ha: We had to stay inside all the time. We just looked through the window to see what was going on in the street. Then I heard many screaming from the people who tried to fight against the government. We smelled some grenades, something hot that makes you sneeze?

Kranich: Oh, pepper spray?

Ha: Yeah, something like that you know, and smoke. I remember that.

Kranich: Who was doing the fighting? Which military were you talking about?

Ha: The South Vietnam. This happened in my city in South Vietnam.

Kranich: Then after your president was killed, who was in power?

Ha: I think someone from the military took over the government.

Kranich: Did you see any U.S. military at this time?

Ha: No, not at that time.

Kranich: So no U.S. presence in 1963 in Da Lat?

Ha: No.

Kranich: How did you feel after that? How many days before you could go back to school?

Ha: I don't remember exactly, but I think I stayed home for a really long time, maybe a couple of weeks.

Kranich: Were all of the family living at home at this time or did you have any older siblings living elsewhere?

Ha: We all lived at home at that time.

Kranich: So you're nine years old, the president is killed. Prior to that there was a crackdown on demonstrators, Buddhists. Then, you all come home. Then, what's the next thing you remember of note?

Ha: The next thing I remember about the war was in 1968. It was in the New Year. All the people were celebrating the New Year. They stayed home and enjoyed the day off and enjoyed all the good food for the New Year. Then, the night of

the New Year we heard a lot of gunshots. A lot of guns and something exploding. Then, finally we heard from the radios that the Viet Cong is coming. The Viet Cong is trying to seize the city, to take over the city. We were so afraid. We were so afraid. We didn't know what was going on.

Kranich: At that time did you see any U.S. soldiers?

Ha: No not at that time either. Later I think I saw the U.S. Army in the city around 1969 or 1970. Because my city is a city for tourists, so not many military troops there. But we have some big schools to train the military in Da Lat, the commanders.

Kranich: The South Vietnamese commanders?

Ha: Yeah, the South Vietnamese commanders. We have a military school like West Point here and another school to train them in political war. Another school to train all the commanders. Three big military schools in Da Lat.

Kranich: So a combination of tourism and this military presence all in one city. So I guess the Americans call what happened that you're referring to as the Tet Offensive. Tell me about what you remember about the fighting in your city during that time?

Ha: During that time we heard the news that the Viet Cong came to the city, but we live at the suburbs which is about three miles from the center of the city. Then I saw some helicopters flying in the sky, and they shoot rockets and machine guns to the small town about three miles away from Da Lat. I saw

some fire, a lot of smoke. Finally, I heard that they burned many houses there to look for Viet Cong.

Kranich: Who was it that was shooting down in the helicopters?

Ha: I guess the South Vietnamese Army and some U.S. Army too, but I didn't see any U.S. army on the ground.

Kranich: So where you grew up, you're seeing the helicopters and the shooting and the bombing. Was anyone that you knew killed in that attack?

Ha: No, I didn't know, but you know I remember the zone where I lived. The chief of that zone was killed with his son by some undercover Viet Cong in my area.

Kranich: I know your mother was a leader in your family. Tell me how she was responding and what she was telling the family at this time.

Ha: My mom she had a lot of experience about war because she lived in the North, and she dealt with many wars there. After we heard the shots and the bombing like that, my mom said that we could not live here because it's too close to some undercover Viet Cong. We need to move to the center of the city where she thought that it was safer. At that time, in the daytime we lived in our house, but in the evening we moved to the center of the city, the whole family. Because my Aunt had a house over there, so we went there to stay through the night. It happened like that for about a week or ten days.

Kranich: So you were going back and forth?

Ha: Yeah

Kranich: Did you have any either South Vietnamese, or Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army soldiers ever approach you or talk to you or knock on your doors?

Ha: No, never.

Kranich: So you guys avoided all that military? What was it like as far as working or going to school during this time and shortly after? How did that get affected?

Ha: Actually, I think it was just about a month and we were back to the normal life. We forgot about all the events. We just heard about that through radio or through the newspapers.

Kranich: And your school was closed for a little while though right?

Ha: Right, because they used the school as a refugee camp for some people that their houses were burned. There was my friend, her house was burned too. She had to live in some schools for a couple of weeks.

Kranich: At this time were you able to get enough food to eat and survive? Were there any scarcities in food or anything?

Ha: Yes, we did have enough food during that time.

Kranich: Tell me what do you remember? What were your first interactions with American soldiers?

Ha: The first time I saw them; I saw some big truck with soldiers in there. I saw them throw out some gum, some chocolates to the younger kids. I was about a teenager at that time, so I didn't pick any candy up. I saw the kids. They tried to get those.

Kranich: What were your feelings towards the soldiers?

Ha: I think they were fun. They like kids.

Kranich: So they were young?

Ha: Yeah, I think they were young. Just about twenty and something.

Kranich: So not much older than you?

Ha: No, yeah. Besides the soldiers, I have some teachers who taught me English at the American-Vietnamese Association Center, something like that. They organized some English classes at night, so I went there for my English class.

Kranich: How old were you then?

Ha: I was about fifteen.

Kranich: Ok, so this is after that bombardment. Was that your first time learning English or did you have it in school prior to that?

Ha: I had some in school prior to that because when I came to sixth grade I had about six hours in English for my school.

Kranich: Did you also learn French?

Ha: Yeah, I learned French when I was in tenth grade.

Kranich: Ok, so you had Vietnamese and English, and then French. So you're bilingual.

Ha: Unfortunately, I forgot a lot of my French.

Kranich: Why did you want to take English at this night school when you were a teenager?

Ha: Because I think at that time many people learned English. That's why I just choose English.

Kranich: What was your experience with Vietnamese soldiers or Viet Cong? Do you remember any interactions that you had with them when you were living in Da Lat?

Ha: Because my brother, he was in the army, too. He had some friends come to the house, but they were friendly because they were my brother's friends. I never stayed too close to Viet Cong, no.

Kranich: How did you know the difference? What signaled to you this was a South Vietnamese? Were the uniforms different?

Ha: Yeah, of course the uniform is very different. For the South, they wore green uniforms. For the Viet Cong just black.

Kranich: Did your brother have to sign up for the military or did he do it because he wanted to?

Ha: Yeah, he had to.

Kranich: Was it compulsory?

Ha: Yeah, at that time the government really needed people to fight for the country.

Kranich: Where is your brother? Is he still in Vietnam now?

Ha: No, after the fall of Saigon in 1975, he was put in jail for six years. Then around 1988 or 1989 there was an agreement between the U.S. and the Vietnamese government. At that time, it was the Viet Cong government already. They arranged some way to allow all the people, all the soldiers and the people in the army who were put in jail more than three years can come to the U.S.A. as refugees.

Kranich: And is that what he did?

Ha: Yeah.

Kranich: What year did he come and where did he go?

Ha: He came in, I think, 1992.

Kranich: So after you came, you were here first?

Ha: Yeah, I came first. I came in 1990, and then two years later he came. He came to Maryland.

Kranich: Is he still living in Maryland?

Ha: Yes, he is. His wife, she's working for the Free Asia Post Radio.

Kranich: Ok, so she's a radio person.

Ha: Yeah.

Kranich: And what does he do?

Ha: My brother he works at Kohl's, the clothing store.

Kranich: Tell me when we spoke at your home, the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, when we talked about that you talked about things that happened months before that. Put me back to that time period before the fall. What was changing? What did your mother and you all sort of realize was happening?

Ha: Around mid-March 1975, all the newspapers, radios, and televisions were talking about the arrangement that divided the country between Republic of Vietnam and Viet Cong. So we heard about that, but we didn't know it came that fast. Just I remember on March nineteenth, that is the first time my city started to know maybe Da Lat will belong to Viet Cong. My mom once again she didn't want to live with Viet Cong, so she decided to move to Saigon, the capital city. Then, my mom rented a bus, and all of our family went to the bus.

My mom tried to carry whatever she could, all the belongings I mean. She tried to bring some rice. I remember it's about two hundred pounds of rice in her purse and all the clothes that we had. I remember one sewing machine too. She brought everything. At that time my dad couldn't come with us because he was still in duty at his work. My older sister decided to stay back with my dad. My oldest brother, he was in a city not too far from Saigon, and the city was called Binh Duong, and it's spelled B-I-N and D-U-O-N-G. We had five sisters and brothers went with my mom at that time. All the difficulty because now the Viet Cong and the South Vietnam soldiers are fighting here and there, so they couldn't go to Saigon. So we had to go to Na Chang. It's a coastal city. Then, we stayed there for one day. Then we heard that Na Chang will be lost to Viet Cong too. Then my mom again didn't want to stay there. We were lucky that the hotel manager, my mom came to talk with him. He said he knew some Navy commander, and they had a ship that was going to go to Saigon. He said he will try to ask him to allow my family to come with that ship. Then the decision was made very fast. It was just about a couple of hours, and then we knew that we could go to Saigon with that ship. Once again, we grabbed everything and got ready to go to the deck where the ship was there. We get up to the ship just around eight or nine at night. At first, we just sit at the deck of the ship. We didn't know where to go. Finally, they decided to allow all the families with young kids and women could go inside into a room. Because the soldiers went to another place and they give us all their rooms.

Kranich: The South Vietnamese soldiers gave you their rooms?

Ha: Right, the Navy.

Kranich: The Navy did, ok. So you got on this ship, and then what happened?

Ha: Then around midnight the ship left to Saigon. I remember it took about two nights and one day to get to Saigon.

Kranich: And you were about fifteen then?

Ha: No, I was twenty already.

Kranich: How were you experiencing going from your city to Saigon, but then going to Saigon and going to this coastal city, and then getting on this ship? Do you remember how you were feeling?

Ha: I feel sad and lost because we didn't know where to go. We didn't what we will have in another city. What would happen if the Viet Cong can come anywhere? I didn't know if we would be safe or not.

Kranich: So where did this ship land?

Ha: It landed in Saigon.

Kranich: Then what happened with you and your family?

Ha: During the ship, my younger sister she made friends with one Navy Lieutenant. That lieutenant told us that he will come back to Saigon in around one month, so we can go there and see him. I am very close with that sister.

She was my younger sister, so on I think about April fifteenth, we went to the place where the ship will land. We met him. When we were sitting and talking with him, I saw many soldiers carrying all the rice and all the stuff to the ship, so we asked him if they were going to rescue some people, some refugees. He said, "No, we are getting ready to move to Australia because we heard that the government will have a meeting with the U.S. government. If after the meeting we didn't get any help from them, any support for them about the army and the guns, then maybe we will have to go because we will lose the country." He said so, so I was so worried. Then he said that if you want to go to talk to your parents and I can carry your family with us on the ship. We asked "How long does it take to go to Saigon to Australia?" He said, "It's about two weeks." I said, "Wow." From Na Chang to Saigon it took two nights and one day, and I didn't feel well. I had some sea-sickness and everything, so I don't want to go like that." He said, "For your freedom you need to make a decision." I said we needed to talk to my parents. Then, we went home and talked with my mom, but at that time my older sister was still stuck in Da Lat. My mom said no. We didn't go anywhere because my sister is still in Da Lat. We didn't go without her. We cannot do anything but stay there. Then just about April twentieth, my sister and I decided to go where the ship landed and see if was still there, but the ship had left. I had a feeling that now we were left behind. We may have to live with Viet Cong.

Kranich: How did you feel when you realized that?

Ha: I felt disappointed. I felt that I didn't know how my life would be.

Kranich: Fast forward to April 30, 1975. Do you remember that day?

Ha: Yeah I do. Early in the morning there were some undercover Viet Cong that came from house to house and told us that the soldiers are coming and just run to the street and welcome them. We know then that they are Viet Cong soldiers and not South Vietnam soldiers anymore. We didn't want to go, but we were so scared that we had to go to the street, stand by the side of the street. We saw all the tanks with all the Viet Cong soldiers sitting on top and waving to us. It was so hateful. I hate them.

Kranich: Did you feel like you had to wave at them or did you not wave at them?

Ha: No, I did not wave to them. We just stood there.

Kranich: What was your mom counseling you now? How was she talking to you about what had just happened? What was she saying to you? Do you remember?

Ha: My mom didn't talk to me you know because she talked to my older sister I guess. After that day my mom decided to go back to Da Lat because now all the South belongs to Viet Cong already. We can travel easier than when we tried to escape from Da Lat.

Kranich: So you saw the soldiers in Saigon after it had fallen. What else did you remember? Did you see any violence that day?

Ha: No, but I saw many South Vietnam soldiers' uniforms around the city. I think all the soldiers who were in the city, they had to take off all their uniforms for their safety.

Kranich: So you recognized them as soldiers, but they weren't wearing their uniforms?

Ha: Yeah, I saw the uniforms on the street.

Kranich: They discarded it?

Ha: Yeah.

Kranich: So your brother, what about him? He was in the South Vietnamese Army, what happened? When did you find out about that, that he was in a prisoner of war camp?

Ha: Not too long after April thirtieth. I think just about one month, three weeks later, Viet Cong government told us that all the soldiers had to go to register to them in order to give them all the training to get to know the new government.

Kranich: I think they called it re-education camp?

Ha: Yeah, but after that they set up all the camps, and they called it the re-education camp. They cheated all the soldiers. They said they should prepare some clothes, some food for just one month for some training, and then you could come back home with your family. But no, it's not true. Everyone believed that was true because everyone thinks the war has ended, so maybe now we have peace. Why don't we do that? Then go back to the families, and

we have peace with the North. But they put all the people who registered for that training to the re-education camps.

Kranich: Were you able to see your brother when he was there?

Ha: It took a while because a couple first years we didn't hear anything from them. Then after that we received some letters, very short letters, from my brother. He let us know where he was living and what we could do to help him. The first thing that I remember that he asked my mom to bring a lot of food for him because he needed that. He didn't say that he was starved, but he said he needed a lot of food.

Kranich: So did your mom go and bring him food?

Ha: No because at that time traveling from city to city was difficult. We had to get a permit from the current government. Just like if I live in a city I need a permit form from a mayor or something like that to allow me to travel. In order to get that, it takes about a week to obtain the paper.

Kranich: Where was your father since he was also in the South Vietnamese military, but he never wore a uniform? What happened to him?

Ha: The people governed our city at that time, they said that they never saw my dad wear uniform. They thought that maybe my dad worked for the CIA, but they didn't do anything to find out more. They allowed my dad to go to some re-education class very close to the house. He went there for about three

weeks, and then they thought that he was ok. He is not CIA, so they agreed to let him go home.

Kranich: Tell me about your sister. Can you tell me about the sister?

Ha: Who went overseas by boat?

Kranich: Yeah, tell me your sister's name, how old you were and how that happened.

Ha: It was in 1987. My older sister, she went overseas, and she could escape from that. It was a ship.

Kranich: So she was on a boat?

Ha: Yeah, we lived in Da Lat. The city is not close to the coast, so we had to travel from Da Lat to Saigon. Then from Saigon we traveled to another city close to the coast, so that we can go to the sea by boat. That time I was married already, so my sister went by herself. In order to do that, my mom had to pay before she went. We paid everything, and then they allowed her to go to the boat. It's a very small boat. The boat went in a river first, and then it flowed to where the river meets the sea. From there they had to transfer to a bigger boat. At that time, at first she thought there was only her boat, but then when they saw the bigger boat, suddenly she saw all these other smaller boats coming at the same time. They all tried to get up to the bigger boat. My sister said, "I thought I was just a girl. Maybe I couldn't make it, but for what miracle I got to the bigger boat. I escaped."

Kranich: So she lived in France?

Ha: She traveled about four days, and she was on a French ship. The ship went around to help all the boat people. When they saw my sister's boat, they helped and rescued them to the ship. They allowed them to choose if they wanted to go to France or if they wanted to go to the refugee camps in the Philippines or Malaysia. They can drop them off there. At that time because my brother's wife was a French Vietnamese she had lived in France already, so she decided to go to France. But then when the ship stopped at a refugee camp in the Philippines, my sister still got off the ship and went around the camps to see what the living conditions were. She said it was terrible, so I decided to go to France. That is a good decision.

Kranich: Definitely. Let me go back a little bit. So Saigon falls and then you're back in Da Lat. Your mom said let's go back here. You're in the same house you grew up in. What was it like when you got back? How was your family living, surviving and interacting?

Ha: First we went back to Da Lat. I still remember the first day that we came back to Da Lat. When we stepped off the bus, and then we saw wow the city had changed a lot. It had totally changed. I came from the capital city. We still wore all the flare pants all the t-shirts and the colors. When we get off the bus, we saw all the people with brown clothes, black clothes. They are just like farmers around the city. We were so scared. Wow, we are so different from them. It's odd, but then we went home. At that time, we walked home. We're

lucky that the bus stopped not too far from my house, so we walked home. After we finished dinner, we heard the speaker that hung up high in the tree close to my house call our names: my name, my sister's name, my younger sister's name. Go to the meeting! We didn't know what happened, but we had to go because now we live with Viet Cong. You cannot go against them, so we had to go. We saw all the people that were the same age as us we were there. The purpose of those meetings were to teach us about the communist theories.

Kranich: So you went there to be re-educated? Is that what it was?

Ha: They didn't call it that. They just called it a meeting, but that is what the purpose was.

Kranich: Were your parents able to work after the Viet Cong controlled the city?

Ha: You know at that time all the offices were closed. Nothing happened at that time. My parents had decided to buy a farm and plant some rice because my mom thought that was safe for my dad because all of the undercover Viet Cong paid attention to our family, especially to my dad.

Kranich: So you're in Da Lat. The U.S. had gone. The Viet Cong are in control. The bright colors that you used to wear are no longer what you see in your town. It's all gray, browns and blacks, very dull. What was your feeling about your future as a young woman? How were you feeling then?

Ha: I felt that I didn't have a future. I just lived day by day because all the decent men they had gone to jail, to the re-education camps most of them. At that time, I decided not to get married. Then when they had all the stuff to go overseas by boat, I decided to go, but I failed twice.

Kranich: What year was this and how old were you?

Ha: It was I think in 1986, so I was about thirty-two already. No, before that, 1983/84 I tried to go overseas by boat, but it didn't work for me. I went with my older sister, and we just didn't make it. When I met my husband now, I decided to get married to him. Then my older sister went alone and she got it.

Kranich: How did you decide that? Did you tell your parents? Did you have to have money to get on the boat?

Ha: After 1975, the living was just like nothing. We just tried to survive. We cannot earn much money to go overseas. At that time, the idea of going overseas was not there either. But then in 1979 when the people who were in the foreign countries just like the U.S.A, France, Australia, I don't know how but they were allowed to send money back to help relatives in Vietnam. But the people in Vietnam started to have some support from overseas, they have money to spend. Da Lat is a tourist city. It started to be alive again. The tourists came to Da Lat a lot, and then we had a business of selling all the produce from Da Lat. We earned money from that. At that time, I stayed home with my mom and my younger sister. We helped my mom run the business. My mom saved some money. When she saw that all of her girls

didn't get married, at that time all my sisters and me didn't want to get married, so my mom decided to allow us to go overseas by boat. Then I and my older sister went first. We went a couple times. We lost the money, and we didn't make it.

Kranich: I mean wow, how did you feel about it?

Ha: Frustrated because we tried to escape from the Viet Cong and we couldn't. We tried to find freedom, but we couldn't.

Kranich: Did you just lose the money like it fell out of your pocket? Did someone take it?

Ha: No, because we had to pay for the people to organize the trip. For us it's not easy. Some people live near the coast. I had to travel from Da Lat to Saigon and from Saigon to another city. We had a lot of traveling. It cost more money than other people, but we tried to do that. The organizer people they cheated us too. They fake. They didn't have any boat, any trip to help us escape. They just said that they did, and then we didn't know and we paid, and we lost the money. They kept calling us about every two or three months saying ok we can go now, so try to come to our cities. Then we tried to travel like that. I remember I did that two or three times. Then I was so disappointed. When I met my husband, I decided to get married to him.

Kranich: How did you meet your husband? Where were you? Do you remember the day?

Ha: I met my husband through an arrangement of my friend. At that time, I worked at a cooperative center. We were knitting sweaters, and I worked with a friend. Her husband was my husband's friend, so my husband came from another city to Da Lat to work after he was released from jail in 1985. He went there in 1986, and they arranged us to meet. I thought ok he was an educated man. He was a former soldier of the former Vietnam Army. That's good for me because I don't want to get married to a Viet Cong. I decided to get married to him.

Kranich: So you were thirty-two?

Ha: Yeah, I was thirty-two.

Kranich: This was 1986?

Ha: Yeah.

Kranich: Ok, so you got married. How did then go from getting married to coming here in 1990? Tell me what your life was like. Did you have any children in Vietnam?

Ha: We got married in 1986. In 1987, I had my first child. At that time, we just helped the business with my mom. We worked with my mom so that we can survive. Plus, in 1987 my older sister, she went overseas successfully. She lived in France, and she sent money back to help us.

Kranich: This is the one that you went with and didn't make it, but she made it on her own. She sent money back. Ok, so you're married and you have two kids?

Ha: Yeah, I have two kids in Vietnam. One more thing, in 1987 my older sister made her trip. In 1988, one of my older sisters and my younger sister, they went by boat and they succeeded too.

Kranich: Where did they end up?

Ha: They ended up in Malaysia, one refugee camp in Malaysia. Then they stayed there for almost a year to learn English. Then they filled out the papers to go to the U.S.A. They were admitted to the U.S.A.

Kranich: Where are they living?

Ha: They live in Maryland with my older brother.

Kranich: So you have some family who have successfully left, France, U.S.A. You're married with two kids. How did you finally end up with your husband here?

Ha: The reason that we can go to U.S.A is because my husband was a prisoner of the Viet Cong. He was in jail about ten years. With the agreement of the Vietnamese and the American government, he got a grant to come to the U.S.A. with his family as refugees. That's why we got the grant to come here. When we knew that we could go to the U.S.A., we didn't know where we would live. We didn't know where in the U.S.A., but I think wherever if we have freedom, then it's ok to us. Then you know, my husband has a brother

who went overseas by boat in 1985. He ended up in Urbana, Illinois. I don't know how, but the immigration found out about that, and they sent us to Urbana to join him.

Kranich: How did you get here? Did you take a boat? Did you fly? Tell me about that.

Ha: No, we flew because we go legally. We got a flight from Vietnam, and we stopped at Bangkok to finish all the processing for the paperwork to go to the U.S.A. At that time, usually the people when they went to Bangkok they would stay there about a couple of days and they got a flight to the U.S.A. For us, because Urbana is a small city they didn't have many flights to Urbana frequently, so we had to wait about ten days in Thailand.

Kranich: Where did you fly first?

Ha: I flew from Saigon, that was called Ho Chi Minh City already, to Thailand and then from Thailand to Japan, and then from Japan to Chicago, and then Chicago to Urbana.

Kranich: Do you remember what your first impression was of the U.S.A?

Ha: First when I came to Chicago, I said wow the city is full of lights because I came at night. It's beautiful when we saw the city from the airplane. It's so beautiful. Then from Chicago to Urbana it was totally different. It's darker here, quiet and not as many people as in Chicago, but because I lived in a small city in Vietnam I was ok with that.

Kranich: Do you remember what it smelled like or tasted like? Do you have any of those memories? Or your first American food or anything like that?

Ha: The first day I didn't eat American food. I came to my husband's brother's house. He lived in a mobile home at that time. They cooked all Vietnamese food for us. That is so wonderful because during the flights we ate all the strange stuff. We didn't like that. When we took the airplane to Japan, we ate all Japanese food. We didn't like that.

Kranich: So your family of origin because of the war is really split up. It really got kind of displaced. When you reflect back now on your life and the effects of the war on your family, do you have any conclusions? Do you have any thoughts? What do you make of it?

Ha: I think that the war brings out all the sadness, all the loss, all the sufferings, but then lucky because we got a miracle. We can come to the free land. Now we have a better life.

Kranich: You said this word when we met at your home. I haven't heard it yet. You mentioned hope. Can you talk a little bit about what hope has been like in your life? Describe that.

Ha: I usually hoped that everything would be better during the time I was with the Viet Cong. That's why we decided to go overseas. That is a way to hope it will get better, but we didn't get it. Then later on when I got married, the living was tough at that time, but I still hoped that someday I will get better

life. It's true that my husband got the grant to go to the U.S.A., so my hope came true when we came to the U.S.A.

Kranich: When you came to the U.S.A. you weren't rich. You had to find work. Can you tell me a little bit about your transition from meeting your family in Urbana? How did you get established?

Ha: Would you believe that when we came to the U.S.A. we had only nine hundred dollars? My mom gave me some gold, and when I came to Thailand I sold the gold to get dollars. We had about nine hundred dollars from the beginning. We came here, and we got public assistance from the government here. At that time, they gave us one year of public assistance. That means cash and food stamps, so we survived with that. I remember my husband went back to school at the adult education in Urbana to learn his English again. Then I stayed home with my kids. He went there just about a couple months. Then he got his GED, so he decided to find a job. He got a job at some factory in town. He stayed there until he retired. That's a good thing. We got lucky that in 1992 the refugee director Ms. (unintelligible) encouraged me to apply for the Habitat house, and I got the second house from Habitat. It's a very good program because we can buy a house. We just had to deposit five hundred working hours. That is our deposit and five hundred dollars. Then we can have the house. We pay for the house in twenty years with no interest. How sweet it is, it's so nice. We lived in that house for nine years. We saved money, and then my kids were getting older. They were growing up, so I wanted them to live in a better area, so we decided to move to another house.

Kranich: Also you work here in the U.S. Tell me what you do.

Ha: At first, I didn't know what I will do. I knew some English already, but no degrees, no certificates, nothing. I am lucky because (unintelligible), the refugee director, was my teacher in Vietnam. She didn't know that I already knew English until I brought some University transcripts to her to translate into English. She found out that I had some basic English. She decided to interview me to become her staff. That's when I started my job from 1993 until now.

Kranich: And you also work at Carle?

Ha: Yeah.

Kranich: What do you do there?

Ha: I am a medical interpreter for Carle.

Kranich: We've also interviewed U.S. soldiers that were in combat that went to Vietnam to fight. Some of them said they didn't believe in the reasons we were there or they saw people were killed. They have horrible memories, and they can't function in life. When you hear stories like that you do you interpret that in your assessment of the war?

Ha: I think that it is right because they are strangers just like the Vietnamese were. They were strangers in Vietnam. They didn't know the culture. They didn't know the food. They didn't know the area. They didn't know anything about

Vietnam, and they had to live there. They had to fight too, so it was a lot of stress for them.

Kranich: When the U.S. did pull out, did you wish they had stayed? Were you angry? What was your thought about the U.S. relationship to fighting the war against communism?

Ha: No, not angry at all. I am thankful for their presence in Vietnam. With their help, at least we can fight Viet Cong for a while.

Kranich: Ok, so you got here in 1990. Did you go back to Vietnam? If so when, and what for?

Ha: I went back there twice. The first time I went back was in 1998 when I got my U.S. citizenship already. I think now I am safe to go back there, so I went back there with my two girls to visit my parents, so that my girl who was born here can see her grandparents. My kids they really love living there because here they never hold the money to buy food because they were too little. There they can hold money and buy this, buy that on the street. That is the Vietnamese culture. They enjoyed that.

Kranich: So, you said you felt safe. You went back, and you felt safe. So it was only after you were a U.S. citizen that you felt safe enough to go back. Is that right?

Ha: Yeah, because with the U.S. citizenship if they get me in trouble at least I can get help from the U.S. embassy. Because who knows with the Viet Cong what will happen to you?

Kranich: What was the reason for the second time?

Ha: The second time was in 2004 when my dad died. Then three months later I came back there to visit my mom and to see my dad's grave.

Kranich: And then shortly after that, your mom...?

Ha: Yeah, just about six months later my mom passed away too because I think maybe she was lonely.

Kranich: When you think back about your parents and the way they supported you and encouraged you, what do you take away? What do you think of when you think of your parents now as a woman you are here in the U.S., an American citizen?

Ha: I feel so thankful to my parents because you know my parents didn't go to school at all, but then they saw what was good for their children's future. All of her children can go to school, can have some education, can have some knowledge. Then I think my mom sacrificed for us a lot because she keeps thinking about our safety. That's why we had to move here and there, just for safety, for surviving.

Kranich: Is there anything else you want to tell us about either your experiences of being a civilian in war or your experiences as a new immigrant, a refugee really?

Ha: I think the war brought us some bad things, but then from the war we got some good things too. The bad thing is when we lived with Viet Cong. The good thing is because of that we could go to the U.S.A.